

Book Reviews

Kiran Bedi, Parminder Jeet Singh, and Sandeep Srivastava. *Governance @ Net: New Governance Opportunities for India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001. 374 pages. Paperback. Indian Rs 295.00.

Considering that India faces an acute shortage of electricity, has a poor telephone network, an extremely low level of human development, and an even lower rate of computer ownership (4.5 per thousand), it is premature to fantasise about the benefits of electronic government. Fantasising, however, is precisely what the three authors of *Governance @ Net: New Governance Opportunities for India* engage in.

The argument is that by incorporating computer technology into governance structures the entire system can be made more efficient. It is pointed out, correctly, that India's main problem lies with allocating resources efficiently. Government initiatives in social welfare and food distribution do not touch their targets in an effective or meaningful manner. People have to go through various ordeals when paying bills, posting income tax returns, and registering complaints.

The Internet can allow people to pay their bills, submit forms, and register complaints with the relevant authorities on line. Corruption can be checked by foolproof security arrangements that track all decisions being made and implemented. Citizens can form Internet communities and groups to better articulate their demands and make politicians sitting in local, provincial, and national representative bodies take heed. Through the application of Internet technology to the service delivery side of the public sector, general improvement in the condition of the masses can be brought about. Theory can be likened to a beautiful ceramic vase; great to look at and inspiring but all too easily shattered by the iron hammer of reality.

In India the percentage of the population with access to Internet-ready computers is miniscule. Most of this electronic elite (e-élite) belongs to the English-speaking bureaucratic/technocratic and business classes of India. There is no doubt that such individuals would benefit from being able to get forms and to pay bills online via credit-cards. Since these well-off segments of the population generate much more in terms of income tax and demand for goods and services than the masses of unclothed (or poorly clothed) and starving Indians that populate the cities and countryside, there is indeed logic to making life easier for them through e-governance. This logic is not, however, of the democratic variety, as the authors would like to contend. It is the logic of facilitating the wealthy few by creating parallel governance structures so that in the long run (which is always suspect in South Asia) the masses can benefit.

The idea that the Internet can eliminate corruption from those sectors in which it is functional needs much greater analysis. Yet it is true that the use of the Internet can minimise contact between those citizens with computers and the abrasive state apparatus. At the practical level the operation of e-government structures will require specialised personnel ranging from Information Systems Managers to Data Base Administrators and Data Entry Operators. The bureaucracy will have to be expanded and re-orientated as well as re-trained.

The highly technical nature of the work and the volume of information to be processed raise questions as to who will oversee the new e-bureaucrats. The chances of corruption can increase if one has to give sensitive information (such as credit card numbers, tax numbers, addresses, etc.) over a computer rather than face-to-face. A main factor in the prevailing sociocultural norms in South Asia and the likely result of e-governance would be that people start bribing, courting, and pressurising the new information management cadres.

Imagine the crisis that would erupt if on the last day for filing tax returns there was a power breakdown. Even if generators were installed in all relevant government buildings to deal with this contingency, ordinary people, who do not have private generators, would miss the deadline. If real records (i.e., on paper in file cabinets) had to be maintained in addition to the new electronic Internet-ready databases, the redundancy would be staggering. The old information management system would have to be kept running and updated as backup.

The security-related features of the Internet are perhaps the most worrisome from the perspective of both citizens and governments. The use of computers as databases on closed networks in government offices has no doubt significantly improved the efficiency of government departments, even though people still have to visit government offices to get things done. In order to be useful, however, e-government requires that people have access to the structures online. Still, what is accessible on the Internet can be hacked into, modified, or destroyed from just about anywhere in the world by anyone with the right know-how and enough time.

In regard to the historical process, the authors believe that "Democracy could not have emerged without printing...It was the broadcast media that really put the masses at large in touch with politics...So with each technological advance the state evolved. Its control shifted out of a few private hands and became more and more public. Alongside, the efficiency and reach of the state also improved" (page 17).

This philosophical base from which the authors make their case is extremely flimsy. One need not have read much history to know that democracy and republicanism are ancient concepts that predate the advent of moveable type by nearly two thousand years. The Roman Republic was founded in 509 B.C. and endured till 31 B.C. Athenian democracy was inaugurated in 508 B.C. and lasted till the Macedonian conquest of Greece. Even if, for the sake of argument, it is accepted that access to inexpensive published material is the necessary condition for the

emergence of democracy, then it should have taken root in China. By the eleventh century A.D. it is estimated that China had a literacy level as high as one-fourth of the population.

Technology is morally neutral. The same printing presses, radio technology, televisions, and computers that promote awareness are also excellent tools of mass indoctrination and espionage. The totalitarian ideological state is a distinctly modern phenomenon that depends upon the mass media to manipulate the population's perception of reality. The capacity to intrude upon individual privacy now possessed by states is simply unparalleled in history. Phone conversations, faxes, and e-mails can all be intercepted and scrutinised with alarming ease. The Internet can just as easily make possible a degree of dictatorship that would make even the twentieth century autocracies look relatively benign.

The greatness of representative democracy is its ability to gauge public opinion and demands at regular intervals through elections without necessitating the continuous involvement of citizens in governing the country. An efficient, dedicated, and reasonably well-remunerated bureaucracy can ensure that routine problems and complaints are addressed in the due course so that elected representatives may concentrate on policy matters. Almost any form of government, if supported by an effective permanent bureaucratic establishment, can work wonders, with or without fancy e-gadgetry.

In South Asia the quality of the permanent institutions of state has been in decline since independence. Politicisation, corruption, and sub-national loyalties pervade the bureaucracy. The political process itself is based on patronage while the promises made in party manifestoes and the expectations of the electorate, the majority of whom are illiterate, bear little relation to the resources available. This sad situation has come about in spite of the fact that South Asia in general, and India in particular, inherited an economic and political base far superior to the rest of the developing world; the Second World War did not physically devastate the Subcontinent. The virtual democracy and active citizen participation envisaged by the authors of the book under review is likely to destabilise governance structures and create a potentially paralysing situation.

The language and format used to develop the argument, though often technical, is easy to understand. Case studies of individual projects involving successful application of Internet technology to the problems of village communities provide the fig leaf of empiricism. But as a guide to the possible uses of the Internet the book is useful, well-organised and very informative. Practical and historical criteria notwithstanding, *Governance@Net* merits the attention of practitioners and students of statecraft.

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